

ROD SERLING'S THE TWILIGHT ZONE MAGAZINE

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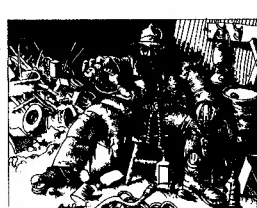
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THE RULES



THE GAME

THE RULES OF THE GAME by Jack Ritchie

WHAT IS IT THAT YOU WISH FOR, WHEN A WISH IS GUARANTEED TO COME OUT WRONG?

It happened two years ago, and today I regard myself as a rich man. My daily constitutional carries me through the city park, and it was then that I heard the cry for help. My attention was immediately drawn to the river, where I spied someone in the water, apparently in great difficulty.

I looked about hopefully for someone younger who might effect a rescue, but there was no one else in sight. There remained nothing for me to do but shed my jacket, kick off my shoes, and dive into the water.

I reached the imperiled individual in half a dozen strokes. He was small, light, and quite cooperative, so that it was no great task to haul him back to the river bank.

When we reached solid ground, he stood up, shook himself rather like a dog, then grinned impudently.

"You're a little old for this type of thing, aren't you?" he said.

I agreed. "Are you all right?"

He nodded and seemed to have a little trouble suppressing a giggle. "Well, well, it seems you've saved my life. Naturally I am overwhelmingly grateful. Therefore, through the powers vested in me, I am in a position to grant you—"

He paused for effect.

"—three wishes!"

I studied him. He was certainly a weird little man. His age was difficult to gauge, though he gave the impression of having been on this earth for quite some time.

And then I smiled. Yes, I saw it all now. Some television producer had hired this little person to fling himself into the waters to be rescued by an unsuspecting passerby, who would then be asked to name his three wishes—all for the amusement of the television audience.

I glanced covertly to the right and the left. Where were the tv cameras hidden? There must be a telephoto lens, somewhere in the bushes, fixed upon me at this very moment. And certainly a microphone must be near.

How many people were watching this program? Or was it, perhaps, being video-taped? Probably the latter. What would these people expect my

first wish to be? Very likely a crass request for money.

No, I would not embarrass myself by being so obvious. I must wish for something besides money. Perhaps health and happiness for the entire world? Yes, that was it. A bit heavy perhaps, but it should reflect rather well on me.

But first I decided to inject a bit of humor into the proceedings, to show the viewing audience that I was not such a dolt as to be seriously taken in by the offer of three wishes.

Sitting down on the grass, I began putting on my shoes over my wet socks. "Well, for openers," I said, smiling benevolently at the little man, "I wish that I were dry."

It wasn't until I had finished tying the second shoelace that I realized the truth. I was dry. Completely dry.

I blinked. Was I asleep? Dreaming? Or was it remotely possible that . . .

I stared at the little man. "How long have you been faking these drownings and handing out your three wishes?"

"Well over five hundred years."

I tried another question. "Suppose, just *suppose*, that I wished for a million dollars. Would I really get the money?"

"But of course."

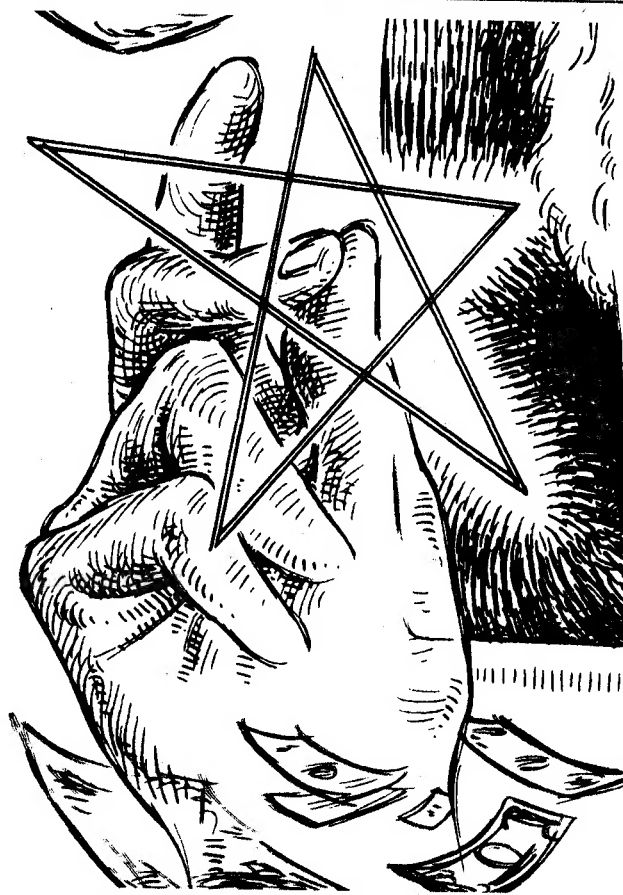
"However, wouldn't this money turn out to be in Confederate bills? Or counterfeit? Or stolen? In other words, I could get into all kinds of trouble, couldn't I? And isn't it true that *everybody* who ever got three wishes from a little man like you inevitably ended off worse than when he started?"

A giggle escaped. "When you make your wishes, you *must* be specific. Very specific. Otherwise there might be some slight misunderstanding. Now what is your second wish?"

"I'm thinking about it," I said a bit sharply. "I'm thinking."

He shrugged. "Take your time. I'll be with you until you make all three of your wishes. Rules of the game, you know."

I began walking. I half expected, half hoped that someone would shout to me that I was getting out of camera range.



No one did.

The little man hopped and skipped at my side. I wondered what passersby might make of the sight of the two of us, but the little man just grinned. "Nobody but you can see me. As far as anyone else is concerned, you are alone."

I continued resolutely to my apartment. The little man was not at all impressed by its size or furnishings.

"Just think what you could do with a couple of million dollars," he said. He watched me hang up my jacket. "Or how about youth? Why not wish for youth? Don't you want to be young again?"

Young again?

It was quite tempting. But how *much* youth would I get? Would he turn me into some babe in arms? An orphan? Would I be sickly? Or so unattractive as to never be adopted? Or adopted by the wrong kind of people? Would I lack proper parental supervision? Would I turn into a juvenile delinquent as I grew older? Would this lead to more serious crime? Confinement in prison for the rest of my new life?

I found myself perspiring faintly. There were so many unpleasant variables. If I *did* wish for youth, I had to be absolutely precise about what I meant. One little slip or omission and I could find myself in a disastrous situation.

"Tell me," I said warily. "Has *anyone* ever succeeded in outwitting you in the matter of those wishes?"

He smiled faintly, examined my tv set, and turned it on.

"It doesn't work," I said.

He held a hand over the set. "Could be a loose wire. If I just give it a sharp rap . . ."

"I wish it were that simple, but the picture tube is—"

He slapped the side of the set smartly. A clear and perfect picture flashed onto the screen.

He giggled. "And now what is your third wish?"

I closed my eyes. I had just wasted my second wish. Been tricked into it, in fact. I had but one wish left.

I opened my eyes. "Just one moment. Before we proceed any further, let us establish one definite rule. I do not want my third wish to come trippingly off the tongue in some unguarded moment or occur because I mumbled something in my sleep. When I make that third wish, it will be in an absolutely formal and prescribed manner. I will say, 'I, Andrew H. Meeker, being of sound mind and tired body, do hereby wish that . . . ' and I shall fill in the blank."

He agreed readily enough. "Very well. And what is your third wish?"

"I've got to do more thinking about it."

Youth? To live my life again?

With the same genes? The same chromosomes? Would I really *want* to live my life again if it proved to be essentially the same as the one I had lived so far?

I had never married. What relatives I had were disinterested. I would go to the office each work day, and one day was like another and had been for the last thirty years. I would come back to my silent apartment and work my chess problems, or watch tv, or read.

The little man looked up from the television set. "Well?"

I sighed. "Something dreadful will happen after I make my third wish, won't it?"

He looked innocent. "Something dreadful? But when I dried your clothes, nothing dreadful happened. When I fixed your tv, nothing dreadful happened."

"Yes, but those were throwaway wishes and you know it. Now you're waiting for my third wish, and you're going to lower the boom."

He suppressed a smile and turned back to the tv to watch a rerun of *I Love Lucy*.

Yes, it has been two years since the little man entered my life. He has since turned into an avid tv watcher, a competent chess player, and a cheerful companion on my walks.

I still haven't made my third wish. I never will, of course.

After all, I now have something that had been missing in my life.

A good friend. 17